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ABSTRACT

This study investigated children's preference and comprehension responses to stories in which both male and female main characters were represented in traditional and nontraditional roles, and stories in which only the opposite sex main characters were portrayed in those roles. A total of 218 girls and 169 boys from grades five and six (all with at least fourth grade reading ability) read and answered comprehension questions on either two or four stories. They also answered three questions concerning preferences for story, main character, and identification. For subjects who read two stories, comprehension scores were not significantly different for either sex or story type. However, boys who read only stories with female characters preferred the nontraditional main character and selected her for identification. For subjects who read four stories, boys' comprehension scores were higher for stories with male main characters than female main characters. Girls preferred stories with female main characters and preferred the nontraditional male story over the traditional one; boys preferred stories with male main characters and the traditional male story over the nontraditional male story. The results for character preference were similar to those for story preference. Same sex preferences were also found for identification choices, and girls who selected a male main character preferred the nontraditional one. Results and implications are discussed in detail. (Author/SS)

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Gender Roles in Children's Stories:

Effect on Preference and Comprehension

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American Educational Research Association
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Gender Roles in Children's Stories:
Effect on Preference and Comprehension

It is widely accepted that the content of children's stories is influential in determining what, why, and how well children read. By far, the largest amount of research in this area has taken the form of surveys of children's interests and reading preferences, which have included detailed record-keeping of books checked out of public and school libraries, direct questioning of children by paper-and-pencil and interview techniques, and recording children's differential use of selected collections. This literature is voluminous and has produced dozens of generalizations about what kind of books children of various ages, grades, races, geographic locations, and socioeconomic backgrounds like to read (Monson & Peltola, 1976). There is a tremendous amount of overlap among all groups' preferences, interests, and habits, but some of the most consistently cited generalizations are sex differences. Girls read more widely than boys and their scope of interest and enjoyment extends to stories with male main characters and masculine themes--e.g., sports, other forms of competition, adventure and exploration--although these are rarely their favorites. Boys, on the other hand, have traditionally rejected stories with female main characters and feminine themes (Kujoth, 1970; Tibbetts, 1974). Reviewing this literature leaves little doubt that children have been sex typed in their reading content preferences and boys have appeared to be more rigidly sex typed than girls.

The relationship between content and how well children read is not firmly established. The assumption that children will better understand material of interest to them is intuitively logical and attractive. It is not the result of overwhelming empirical support. A number of studies

have reported that children's comprehension scores on high-interest reading material were significantly higher than scores on low-interest material (Asher & Markell, 1974; Bernstein, 1955; Estes & Vaughan, 1973; Schnayer, 1978). But Asher (1975), Brooks (1972), and Scholtz (1975) all reported no significant differences between comprehension scores on high-interest and low-interest materials.

Nonetheless, the assumed relationship between interest and reading ability has influenced the content of children's reading texts and has specifically affected sex-role-related aspects of content. Sexton's (1969) critique of the "feminized" American school stimulated a rash of projects designed to compensate for female domination of boys' education. This included widespread revision of reading texts, which had been criticized by Blom, Waite, and Zimet (1970) for their lack of sex-role differentiation and adult sex-role modeling.

Two studies imply that specific content of reading texts may be differentially advantageous for boys insofar as measured reading ability is concerned. Asher and Markell's (1974) study indicated a possible gender-related relationship between interest in content and comprehension: Their female subjects had greater comprehension of low-interest material than boys. However, their second study (Asher, 1975) contradicted the first in that no significant difference between between comprehension of high- and low-interest material was obtained for either sex.

Stanchfield has reported that the use of boy-oriented texts contributed to increased reading achievement of boys in a special sex-segregated instructional program. However, she has further reported that a different set of boy-oriented basal reading materials produced significantly higher

achievement scores for both boys and girls than for children using a state-adopted series (Stanchfield, 1973).

Does this evidence imply that large-scale revision of readers focusing on masculine themes and characters would significantly enhance boy's reading ability and reduce the number and severity of their reading problems? Does it also imply that such a masculine orientation would not only have no ill effect on girls' reading ability but might well improve their achievement as well?

There is little doubt that the nature of reader content changed during the 1960's and early 1970's and that the change favored males—at least in terms of the numbers of main characters, illustrations, and portrayals of adults in occupational roles. Whether the change resulted from affective implications of the criticisms of Blom, Waite and Zimet (1970) or from the cognitive implications of criticisms such as those published by Sexton (1969) and Stanchfield (1973), one cannot be certain. However, numerous reports have substantiated the disparity in numbers of females and males represented in reading texts and many have further characterized these texts as sex-role-stereotyped and sexist. These critics have focused on the role of the textbook as an agent of socialization. They have suggested that the minor stereotyped roles assigned to female story characters negatively affect girls' self-concepts, restrict their adult role expectations and goals, and reinforce the myth of male superiority. Studies by Frasher and Walker (1972), Marten and Matlin (1976), and Women on Words and Images (1971) are representative. They imply that motivational considerations for boys' reading have taken priority at the expense of girls' and that the questionable achievement gain for boys is not worth the potentially damaging effect on girls' development.

Whether reading texts are actually boy-oriented in that they have been responsible for boys' improved attitudes toward reading, significantly reduced their reading problems, and increased their reading achievement has not been established. What effect the stories in reading textbooks have had on girls' attitudes, future roles and goals, or even their reading ability has not been substantiated, either. The fact is that very little research has been conducted on the relationship between story content and any aspect of children's behavior other than their expressed preferences for certain topics. Even fewer studies have attempted to ascertain whether relationships exist among the sex typing of stories, the sex typing of children's interests, and reading performance.

Jennings (1975) reported the results of a study in which preschool children were told stories in which an adult was featured in a traditionally sex-typed occupational role or in a role typically associated with the opposite sex. The subjects were tested for recall and preference. Both sexes preferred the stories with the sex-typed roles, but had better recall scores for the stories with the reversed sex roles. Although this study is not comparable to those cited earlier, in which children actually read selections related to personal, rather than sex-typed, interests, it provides a provocative contrast to the previously-cited results that implied that interest-related content produces greater comprehension. Jennings attributed superior recall of reversed sex-role story content to its novelty.

Stimulated by Jennings' study and by personal experience with a popular children's book (Frasher, 1977), the authors of this report conducted an investigation of elementary children's preference for and con-

prehension of sex-typed stories (Frasher & Frasher, 1978). We found that (a) comprehension scores of both girls and boys were significantly higher for a story with a nonstereotyped main character and theme than for a story with a traditional, sex-typed theme and main character, (b) girls preferred a story in which a girl main character engaged in nontraditional behavior, and (c) boys were about evenly divided in their preference for two stories with boy main characters. These results failed to support the proposition that selecting stories with sex-typed content would facilitate reading comprehension. They even failed to support a motivational advantage for sex-typing reading materials.

In the study just described (Frasher & Frasher, 1978), as in the Jennings (1975) experiment, female subjects responded only to stories with female main characters and male subjects only to stories with male main characters. The investigation described below extended the basic design of the previous studies to include children's preference and comprehension responses to (a) stories in which both male and female main characters were represented in traditional and nontraditional roles and (b) stories in which only opposite sex main characters were portrayed in traditional and nontraditional roles. The purpose of the current study, then, was to answer the following questions:

1. When presented with four stories, will intermediate grade children differ in their preference for and comprehension of stories with
   a. a traditional theme and a main character of the same sex as the subjects'

b. a nontraditional theme and main character of the same sex as the subjects'

c. a traditional theme and a main character of the sex opposite the subjects'

d. a nontraditional theme and a main character of the sex opposite the subjects'?

2. When presented with two stories with main characters of the same sex as the subjects', will intermediate grade children differ in their preference for and comprehension of stories with

a. a traditional theme, or

b. a nontraditional theme?

3. When presented with two stories with main characters of the sex opposite the subjects', will intermediate grade children differ in their preference for and comprehension of stories with

a. a traditional theme, or

b. a nontraditional theme?

Method

Subjects

Fifth, and sixth grade children from four public elementary schools were involved in the study. A total of 218 girls and 169 boys participated. Extensive busing of children in the school district in which the study took place precludes the accurate classification of subjects on a socio-economic basis. The race of individual subjects was not ascertained.

Procedure

Four stories were selected from reading texts designed for use by intermediate readers. One story featured a traditional, stereotyped female main character and theme. In this story, a "tomboy" became dissatisfied with her status and attempted to become more lady-like in order to gain the attention of the boys in her class. In the second story with a female main character, a girl rescued a smaller child from a bully, staunchly defended her minority race and family, and won a foot race against the bully. These traits--courage, integrity, and strength--have typically been associated with male protagonists in children's stories. Therefore this story was designated a nontraditional, nonstereotyped story. One story featured a traditional, stereotyped male main character and theme. In this story, a boy who recently moved to the city had to learn to cope with a new environment that included some tough antagonists. Eventually he proved himself in a physical confrontation with a gang leader. This story also had a masculine secondary theme--baseball. The second story featuring a male main character first portrayed him as a bully and a troublemaker. He injured a bird, was forced to face the results of his irresponsibility, and took the bird home. The remainder of the story focused on his care and concern not only for this animal but for other animals as well. He also became more sensitive to his teacher and peers, abandoned his trouble-making ways, and became cooperative, helpful, and responsible. His behavior was much more like that usually ascribed to storybook girls than to fictional boys' behavior. This story was designated a nontraditional, nonstereotyped story.

The four stories were similar in that each was set in a contemporary urban community, included a child who could be clearly identified as the main character, and had a successful resolution of the conflict involving the main character. All of the stories were of high literary quality. It must be stressed that, although the stories designated as stereotyped did in fact feature traditional, sex-typed themes and characters, they were not flat, poorly developed, or unrealistic. It must also be emphasized that the cross-sex-typed behaviors of the non-traditional main characters were neither contrived nor inconsistent. Despite their general association with the opposite sex in children's literature, the characters' behaviors were internally consistent and entirely appropriate in the specific contexts of the stories.

A large number of persons assisted in the selection of the stories. The senior investigators and three graduate students initially selected the stories described above and a set of alternatives. All of these were submitted to other graduate students, classroom teachers, and children for their evaluation of (a) whether the main characters and themes were sex-typed, and, if so, whether they would be designated masculine or feminine, (b) their interest appeal and appropriateness for elementary children, and (c) their literary quality. Three of the stories used in these studies were also used in Frasher and Frasher (1978). A re-evaluation process resulted in one substitution.

In addition to an informal readibility assessment made by classroom teachers, the Harris-Jacobsen (Harris & Sipay, 1975) and Lorge (1959) readability formulas were applied to the stories, which were judged equivalent according to all three methods of readability estimation. As a result of

these assessments, it was decided that only children of at least fourth grade reading ability would be able to participate in the studies. The stories were prepared in typed, mimeographed form so that illustrations and other format differences would not influence subjects' responses. A pool of multiple-choice comprehension questions was prepared for each story and submitted to graduate students and classroom teachers for validation as to whether the questions (a) sampled similar aspects of each story, (b) were at the recall or inferential level, and (c) were clearly and unambiguously phrased. Questions that were judged as acceptable and those that were revised according to suggested improvements were administered to a pilot group of children. Items missed by all children in the pilot group were deleted; from the remaining items, 5 recall and 5 inferential questions were retained and used. With one point given for each correct answer, the maximum comprehension score possible was 10.

In addition, three preference questions were constructed, asking the subjects to state (a) which story he or she liked best and why (Story Preference), (b) which main character he or she liked best and why (Character Preference), and (c) which main character was most like himself or herself and in what way they were similar (Identification).

Subjects read and responded to either two or four stories in the following manner. They read one story and immediately answered the comprehension questions for that story; then they read a second story and immediately answered the comprehension questions for that story, etc. The order of stories was counterbalanced so that half of each sex group read a traditional story first and the other half read a

nontraditional story first. After the stories and comprehension questions were completed, the subjects wrote their responses to the preference questions.

One group of subjects (76 girls; 75 boys) read both stories with same-sex main characters; i.e., girls read only the two stories with female main characters and boys read only the stories with male main characters. Another group (58 girls; 17 boys) read both stories with opposite-sex main characters; i.e., girls read stories with male main characters and boys read both stories with female main characters. Another group (84 girls; 77 boys) read all four stories. In responding to the preference questions, the latter subjects were asked to list a second choice for all three questions. The procedures were identical in all other respects.

Results

Comprehension

Table 1 displays the mean comprehension scores of subjects who read two stories. The *t*-test for correlated groups was used to compare subjects' responses to traditional and nontraditional stories. No significant differences were obtained for either sex whether the subjects read stories with same sex main characters or opposite sex main characters.

Girls' and boys' mean comprehension scores for four stories were compared by the analysis of variance with repeated measures (Sex of Subject x Sex of Main Character x Traditional/Nontraditional). A significant F-ratio was obtained for the Sex of Subject x Sex of Main Character interaction ($F = 5.32$, $df = 1, 159$, $p = .02$). By inspecting the means in

Table 2, one can determine that the difference consisted of boys' higher comprehension mean for stories with male main characters. No other significant main effects or interactions were detected.

Preference

Subjects' preferences for story, main character, and identification are summarized in Tables 3 and 4. For subjects who read two stories, chi-square analyses detected two significant differences. Boys who read only stories with female main characters preferred the nontraditional main character ($X^2 = 4.76$, df = 1, $p < .05$) and selected her for identification over the traditional main character ($X^2 = 7.12$, df = 1, $p < .01$).

For subjects who read four stories, first-choice preferences were clearly sex dichotomized. An overall X^2 of 60.08 (df = 3, $p < .01$) was obtained for Story Preference. Breakdown of this analysis shows that girls preferred stories with female main characters ($X^2 = 35.69$, df = 1, $p < .01$) and preferred the nontraditional "male" story over the traditional "male" story ($X^2 = 7.12$, df = 1, $p < .01$), while boys preferred stories with male main characters ($X^2 = 12.07$, df = 1, $p < .01$) and preferred the traditional "male" story over the nontraditional "male" story ($X^2 = 4.27$, df = 1, $p < .05$).

An overall X^2 of 31.90 (df = 3, $p < .01$) was obtained for Character Preference. Further analysis of this data yielded results similar to those for Story Preference. Both girls and boys preferred same sex main characters ($X^2 = 22.28$ for girls; $X^2 = 8.16$ for boys; df = 1, $p < .01$ for both analyses), while girls preferred the nontraditional male character ($X^2 = 3.85$, df = 1, $p < .05$) and boys preferred the traditional male

character ($X^2 = 8.33$, df = 1, $p < .01$).

Girls and boys also differed significantly in their Identification preferences ($X^2 = 81.24$, df = 3, $p < .01$). Girls preferred female main characters over male ($X^2 = 41.94$, df = 1, $p < .01$); boys preferred male main characters over female ($X^2 = 44.16$, df = 1, $p < .01$). In addition, girls who selected a male main character for identification preferred the nontraditional character ($X^2 = 4.00$, df = 1, $p < .05$).

When second choice preferences were analyzed, no differences were detected between girls and boys or among stories on either the Story Preference or the Character Preference measures. The sexes differed significantly, however, in their Identification preferences ($X^2 = 24.30$, df = 3, $p < .01$). Boys again preferred male characters ($X^2 = 32.00$, df = 1, $p < .01$).

Discussion

The results obtained in this study are partially contradictory to our earlier findings (Frasher & Frasher, 1978). Sex typing of story and character preference was evident for both girls and boys under certain conditions and boys' comprehension was related to sex of main character under one condition. The sex typing observed in this study was salient in the two components of the study that differed from the earlier one; namely, when children read four stories in which main characters of both sexes were represented in nontraditional and traditional roles and when children read two stories featuring opposite sex main characters only.

In the earlier study, and in one part of the current study, children only had to to choose between same sex main characters in roles that

represented stereotyped and nonstereotyped behavior for that sex. Boys did not differ in their Story Preference, Character Preference, or Identification choices in either study. Girls preferred the non-traditional story and character in the former, but did not differ in the latter. It is possible that these subjects perceived the contextual appropriateness of the main characters' behavior to a greater extent than the "masculineness" or "femininеness" and did not take sex typing into account in making their choices. With the exception of the female subjects in the first study, the children's comments explaining their choices, especially the boys', support this reasoning. Since different stories were used in the two studies, girls' differential preference may have been story specific.

In one of the added conditions of the current study, subjects were given actual choices between stories featuring female and male main characters as well as choices between traditional and nontraditional behaviors. In making their first choice selections, male subjects seem to have contrasted the strong "masculine" aspects of one story to the "feminine" features of the other three and largely rejected the latter. These boys' comments focused on the baseball theme and the competence and courage of the traditional male protagonist. The boys who selected the stories with the nontraditional male and female main characters did so primarily because of their themes of kindness and courage, respectively, while they chose the traditional female because she had good ideas and did funny things.

Girls who read four stories seem to have drawn a similar contrast between the highly "masculine" traditional story and the other three,

but they rejected the former. Their reasons for choosing stories and characters were very similar to the boys'. However, a number of female subjects also indicated that they liked the traditional female main character because she wanted to become more ladylike in order to gain the attention of boys, and a number of others also indicated that they chose the nontraditional female because she had proven that girls are as good or better than boys. However, the baseball theme of the story with the traditional male character was rarely given as a reason by those who preferred that story.

The subjects who read four stories may have been more aware of masculine and feminine stereotypes when they read stories representing several contrasting gender-related stereotypes than those who read only two stories contrasted on one dimension. Girls, in particular, articulated such awareness in their written comments about their choices.

Boys who read only stories about females also apparently were aware of the sex typing of the main characters. The subjects, with few exceptions, rejected the traditional female. Like all other subjects who chose the nontraditional story and character, most of the boys stated that she was their choice because of her courage and her loyalty to her family. The few who selected the traditional female especially liked an amusing incident in the story.

Unlike the girls who read four stories, girls who read only stories about boys did not differ significantly in their preference for one over the other. Their reasons for liking the nontraditional story and character were the same as those given by other subjects of both sexes—the protagonist's kindness and his behavior change. Like the children

who read four stories, they also liked the themes of courage and self-sufficiency in the story about the traditional male. The baseball theme was not an important attraction for these female subjects, either.

In summary, girls seem to have made sex typed choices only when both males and females were represented in all roles. This interpretation is consistent with the notion that girls are moderately sex typed in their reading preferences and interests. Given distinct choices, they did prefer female main characters and apparently had some preference for the more "feminine" male main character. In addition, this study supports the contention that girls' reading comprehension is neither adversely nor positively affected by sex typing of materials, whether those materials are biased either in terms of sex of main characters or sex role related nature of themes. It is not possible to determine whether any positive or negative affective effects besides preference were generated by reading the stories, but some girl subjects were clearly aware of the sex typing of the female characters' behaviors. Although the traditional female in the story used in the current study did not elicit the critical comments that the main character in the original story did, her most nontraditional characteristics were singled out for praise more frequently than her aspirations to become a "lady".

Boys appeared to respond to sex role stereotypes only when they perceived a distinct contrast between what has generally been considered appropriate and inappropriate masculine behavior. Their preferences were most narrowly sex typed when they were given male and female choice possibilities and when they were forced to choose between two female characters. In both instances they selected the most "masculine" story

and character. Based on traditional assumptions about sex typing, one would expect boys to make such selections. Apparently the male subjects who read only stories with same sex main characters did not perceive that the behavior of one of the protaginists was largely "feminine," especially at the conclusion of the story. Obviously they did not consider it inappropriate.

The most puzzling aspect of this study and the previous one relates to boys' comprehension scores. In our earlier study (Frasher & Frasher, 1978) we found that boys achieved higher scores on the nontraditional story questions. In this study, no differences were obtained when boys read only stories with same sex or opposite sex main characters. However, when all four stories were read, boys indicated greater comprehension of stories with male main characters. The latter finding is partially consistent with the "masculine" preference indicated by the same boys. However, sex typing of role did not interact with the other two factors, as it appeared to do with respect to story and character preference. Therefore, while it appears that the current comprehension results favor stories with male main characters for boys, it does not indicate that sex typed themes and roles have a similar influence. Since sex typing of theme and role did not produce differences in comprehension under any conditions of the current study, we may conclude that the comprehension results of the earlier study were attributable to bias that was not apparent during its implementation.

Implications

This research has suggested some answers to the questions we set forth. It has posed even more--for both the reading professional and the researcher. At least the following should be considered:

1. Should boys' greater comprehension of stories with male main characters dictate that they read such stories exclusively? Should girls' preferences be ignored on the chance that similar comprehension effects would result from reader stories peopled exclusively with males?
2. Should girls' preference for both nontraditional and traditional female characters be given greater credibility than in the past? If a more equitable representation of the sexes in main character roles is attained, will reading achievement be affected?
3. Should girls' preference for less "masculine" male main characters be taken into account? Are boys ready for such stories? Our boy subjects did not favor the nontraditional male main character on any of the preference measures, but in two instances were about equally divided on Story and Character Preference and in all conditions selected him for Identification as often as his more "masculine" counterpart. The sensitive, caring male is still rare in children's texts. Perhaps boys' unwillingness to accept such characters has been overestimated.
4. To what extent are children actually aware of sex role stereotypes in stories? Which do they perceive as positive for their own sex, the other sex, and for both sexes? Which do they perceive as negative? To what does stereotyping, as opposed to other considerations,

influence their story choices?

If the reading anthology is to remain the major vehicle for reading instruction, these questions must continue to be considered.

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TABLE 1

Mean Comprehension Scores: Two Stories

Group	n	Nontraditional Story	Traditional Story
Same Sex Main Character			
Girls	76	8.64	8.95
Boys	75	8.81	8.87
Opposite Sex Main Character			
Girls	58	8.66	8.50
Boys	17	9.00	9.29

TABLE 2

Mean Comprehension Scores: Four Stories

Group	n	Nontraditional Story: Female	Traditional Story: Female	Nontraditional Story: Male	Traditional Story: Male
Girls	84	8.92	9.04	9.14	8.75
Boys	77	8.84	8.91	9.14	9.17
Total					

TABLE 3

Preference Frequencies: Two Stories

Group	n	Nontraditional	Traditional
Story preference			
Same Sex Main Character			
Girls	76	36	40
Boys	75	37	38
Opposite Sex Main Character			
Girls	58	29	29
Boys	17	12	5
Character preference			
Same Sex Main Character			
Girls	75	40	35
Boys	75	41	34
Opposite Sex Main Character			
Girls	58	27	31
Boys	17	13	4
Identification			
Same Sex Main Character			
Girls	74	45	29
Boys	74	44	30
Opposite Sex Main Character			
Girls	58	27	31
Boys	17	14	3

TABLE 4

Preference Frequencies: Four Stories

Group	n	Nontraditional Story: Female	Traditional Story: Female	Nontraditional Story: Male	Traditional Story: Male
Story Preference					
First Choice					
Girls	84	28	40	13	3
Boys	77	11	9	19	38
Second Choice					
Girls	84	21	27	25	11
Boys	77	17	18	22	20
Character Preference					
First Choice					
Girls	83	31	32	15	5
Boys	77	12	14	14	37
Second Choice					
Girls	77	25	23	19	10
Boys	66	20	12	22	12
Identification					
First Choice					
Girls	83	30	41	8	4
Boys	76	4	5	31	36
Second Choice					
Girls	74	25	17	19	13
Boys	69	5	6	31	27